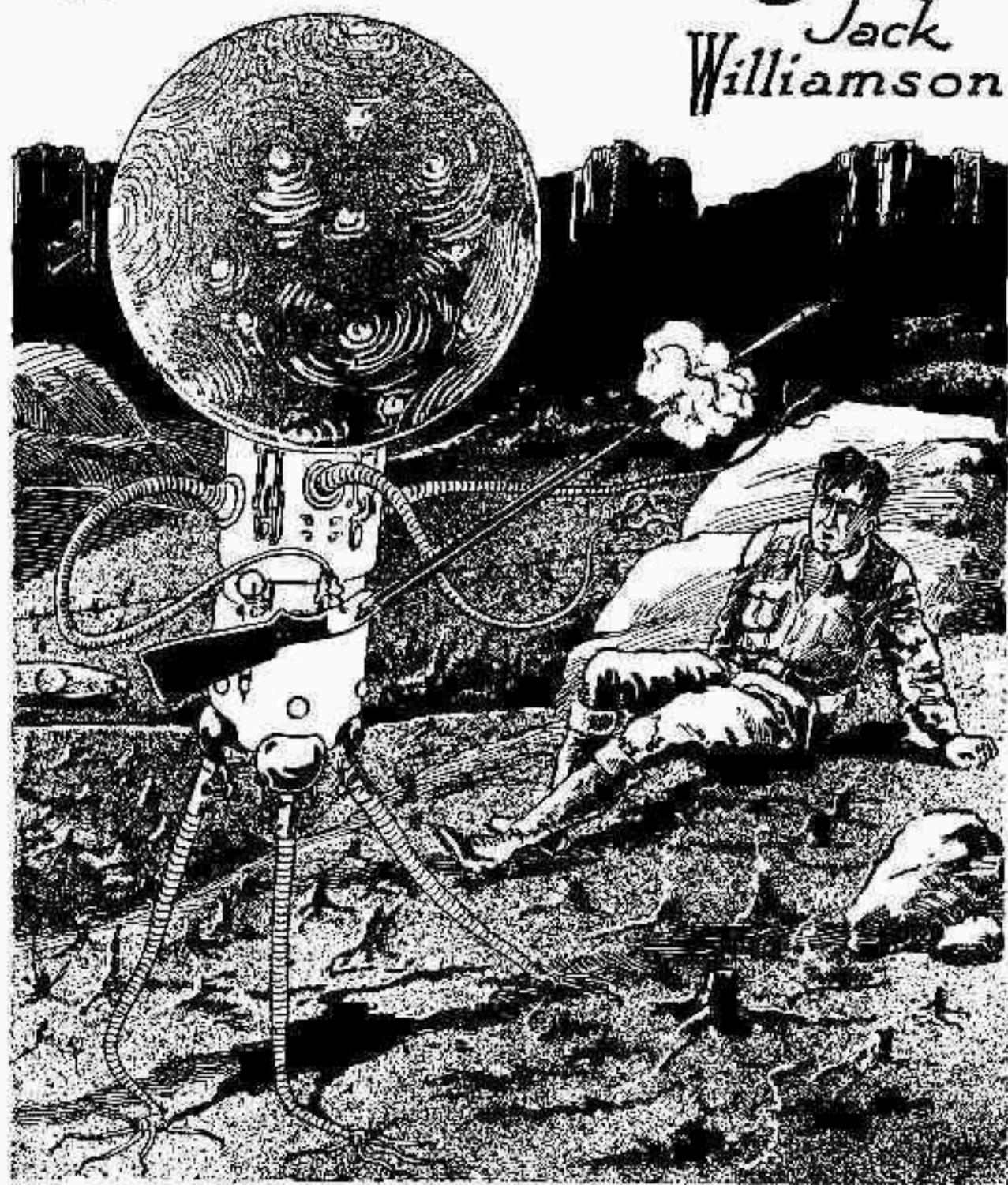


The Alien Intelligence

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The Alien Intelligence

Part II

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What Has Gone Before

WENFIELD FOWLER, a young American living in Perth, Australia, receives by radio a number of messages from Dr. Horace Austen, a well-known scientist who is his friend and benefactor. Austen has gone to explore the Mountain of the Moon located in the great Victoria Desert. He urges Fowler for the sake of mankind to come to him and bring some scientific equipment. He gives Fowler the directions and tells him to look up Melvar, "maiden of the crystal city" who he left near the Silver Lake. Fowler goes off in search of Austen. Coming to the desert he finds a great metal ladder with which to ascend to a plateau and then on the other side another one going down into the valley. On the way down the ladder he notices queer lights playing through the valley, and great shapes swimming through the night air. He meets Melvar, of Astran, the crystal city, and falls in love with her. She conducts him to her city, which is the ruin of a once great civilization. Although the Astranians possess great supplies of precious jewels they had a very low material existence, not even having the knowledge of making fire. They are superstitious and fear the Krimlitt, which are the flying lights that Fowler saw. She conducts him to the city, where he finds that he is not welcome. Austen who preceded him had told the people much of the world beyond and attempted to destroy their superstitions. But Melvar puts him in a place of safety and brings him a letter that she had been holding from Austen. He tells of having investigated the Silver Lake (the touch of whose liquid means death) and believes that many strange things are occurring in this country. He is going beyond the Silver Lake to the crater of the Mountain of the Moon to see what he can discover. Several days later Melvar's brother Naro brings Fowler a note that Jorak the high priest of Astran is going to make a sacrifice of her. She confesses being in love with Fowler. He and Naro rescue her and the three escape from the city. They reach the shores of the Silver Lake where Melvar tells Fowler of the Purple Men, who are beast-like men with the strength of a number of ordinary humans. On the shores of the lake they witness a terrible sight of a great bar of metal formed in the sky and from it drops to the lake great globules of the metal. Fowler concludes that from this metal the lake was formed. But he is mystified about the process taking place in the sky. They go on in search of Austen and are followed by a Purple Man, whom they kill only after literally filling him with bullets. Then one of the ships they use (that of the flying lights) settles down to earth and a half dozen of the Purple Men come after the three. But the red hot ship has set the land between them on fire and the mad'-men plunging through the fire are burnt to death. Fowler also kills from the ship a strange looking green animal that when shot gives a little puff and disappears. The three enter the ship and Fowler examining it discovers that it is a rocket ship which uses the decomposed metal of the Silver Lake as a means of propulsion.

Battle In the Air

I RETURNED to my experiments with the lever. The control was relatively simple. The vessel was propelled forward when the lever was pushed forward, and reversed when the lever was pulled back. Slipping the little disc up or down raised or lowered the prow, and twisting the thing accomplished the steering in the horizontal plane.

By the time my cautious experiments had revealed all of that, Melvar had pointed out three slender crimson craft, wheeling low about us, and evidently preparing to land, I pulled the knob up, and pushed it forward all the way. A pale red beam shot ahead. The black landscape dropped away from us, and we hurtled through the air of the night. I was amazed at the lack of any great sensation of motion, and that the jets of gas, for all their appalling roar without, were barely audible within the cylinder. Still the fore part of the ship was transparent from within, so that we had the oddest sensation of floating free in space.

I saw that the three ships had fallen in a line behind us, and were following at the same terrific pace. When we had reached an altitude of perhaps a mile, I twisted the knob to bring the helm about, and we shot over the Silver Lake, which lay like a white desert of moonlit sand beneath us, standing out sharply against the dark plain around it. In a moment we had gone over it, and over the low hills beyond, and into the bank of purple mist. I had hoped have time to land and have the vessel on the ground below, but I looked back and saw that our pursuers were gaining swiftly, and that slender twisting rays of bright orange and green were darting toward us from the hurtling arrow-like ships of red.

In the darkness and the mist we could see nothing of the ground below. The only visible things were a few mist-veiled stars above, and the bright scarlet torpedoes that shot after us. Quickly I circled and raised the helm. I was almost intoxicated with excitement, and the indescribable sensations of our swift and lofty flight. I felt released from all the weaknesses of the body; I felt as if I had conquered the force that holds all men to earth. I felt a new and wonderful sensation of freedom and power. I had but to move the little piece of metal in my hand to go where I pleased with the speed, almost, of light. But still came the line of ships behind us, at an incredible pace, stabbing at us with the green and orange rays.

Then, high above the others, I brought the ship around in a hair-pin turn, and plunged directly at them. They tried to turn aside, while their rays shot thickly toward us, but our

speed was topgreat. The foremost suddenly turned broadside toward us, attempting to get out of our path. I held our bow directly at it; raised it a trifle at the last instant. The keel of our vessel struck the other amidships. The terrific crash of the collision hurled us to the floor.

When I regained my feet we were falling in a crazy twisting path, our ship altogether out of control. No sooner was I on my feet than the floor tilted up again and I fell back to my hands and knees. I saw that the one we had struck was broken in two and plunging toward the earth far behind us, while the other two were circling about, far overhead. The mist about us grew thicker until the other ships, and the fragments of the wrecked one, were strangely colored purple; thicker still, until they vanished. We floated in a world of purple fog.

I seized the control lever as soon as our wild gyrations enabled me to reach it, but my unskilled efforts only resulted in making us roll and twist more wildly. So long as we had been on an even keel the piloting had been easy enough, although I imagine my success in ramming the other ship had been largely due to luck; but the blow against us had been sidewise, setting the ship to spinning like a top. It seemed that we fell an interminable time. Whenever the stern pointed downward for a moment, I pushed the lever forward, to check our fall as much as possible.

Through the mist I suddenly caught a glimpse of the dark ground below. In another instant the vessel had struck heavily, throwing us against the floor again.

Day was beginning to break at last, and we could see that we had fallen on a bare, gravelly hilltop. The clear space was only an acre or so in extent. We were shut in on all sides by a dense, dark forest of gigantic trees, that rose threateningly, seeming to grasp us, to close in on us. The purple mist hung in a sombre curtain overhead, only faintly lighted by the coming day.

The Silver Falls

NARO and I strapped on our packs, picked up our weapons, and opened the door. The three of us stepped out to face the perils of another world. What they might be, we did not know. I had no idea, even, what part of the country was inhabited by the Krimhi. But Austen had not let himself be conquered by the mere strangeness of the place. I still hoped to be able to find him, although a search in such a jungle as that about us seemed hopeless.

The walls of the rocket ship were still glowing dull red with the heat of its passage through the air, and we hurried away over the gravel for fifty yards, to get beyond the fierce heat it radiated. The patch of sky above was a dull, dusky, luminescent purple. It seemed almost as if the mist shut out the daylight and lit the valley with a weird radiance of its own. All about us towered the forest. As the light grew better, we could see that the trees were red. They bore the same feathery fronds, the same star-like flowers of brilliant white, and the same golden-brown fruits as the plants of the plain about Astran. But they were immensely greater; they towered up hundreds of feet. It was like a forest of the tree-ferns of the Carboniferous period, save for the deep bloody scarlet of the leaves. In fact, I think the red plants are descended from some of them, strangely developed by the unusual climatic conditions of the crater, or by the purple mist.

The ground all about the gravelly knoll was low and marshy, and the air was heavy with the odors of rotting vegetation. There was no wind; and the air, under the great atmospheric pressure, was heavy, moist and hot. It was oppressive. It hung like a weight upon our chests. And the crimson jungle seemed to possess a terrible life and spirit of its own. It did not belong to our world.

The undergrowth was very thick. The higher branches were dimmed by the purple mist. They seemed almost to reach the heavy, dull purple sky. It appeared useless to try to penetrate it. It was an evil being waiting to seize us the moment we crossed its bounds.

I got out my compass, and we decided to try to make our way toward the north, in the direction of the pass by which we supposed Austen to have rounded the Silver Lake. As I had last noted our position above the mist, with reference to the lake and the crater walls, we had been about fifteen miles south of the pass, at an estimate. I hoped, by taking a course in that direction, to come across some trace of Austen.

As we approached the north side of the clearing, I made a startling discovery.

In the side of the hill was a deposit of iron pyrites. Not that there was anything remarkable about that. But the thing that struck me was that the vein had been recently worked! I sprang down in the pit and found on the rock traces of copper that had evidently come from soft copper tools. I knew that Austen would have needed minerals, that, indeed, if he had set up a wireless outfit in here, he must have been compelled to do an immense amount of work in collecting and refining the needed materials. I had little doubt that he had been there, but it had been evidently weeks or months ago. Any trail that he might have made through the forest would have already grown up.

I thought the situation over for a while, but still there seemed nothing better to do than to follow our original plan of exploring the jungle to the north. We plunged into the crimson gloom. Without the compass we would have been quickly lost. Even with it, it was hard enough to keep in the same direction, walking over the marshy, sodden ground and breaking a path through the heavy undergrowth. We were soon covered with mud and dyed red with the stain of the weird vegetation.

For many hours we struggled through a wilderness of endless sameness—a dank morass, a crimson jungle, with the dusky purple sky hanging heavily in the treetops. The bloody scarlet gloom was startling and terrible.

At first the forest had been quiet, with a silence that was dead and depressing, for there were no living things about us. No birds, no insects—not even a bright moth or

butterfly. It was a wilderness of death. But presently we heard, far ahead of us, a dull, constant roar, that grew ever louder as we went on. I supposed that we were approaching a great waterfall. At last it grew so loud that we had to shout when we wished one another to hear our words. I was glad of the roar, for it drowned the sound of our progress through the jungle. But the forest was so dense that there seemed little danger of our capture unless we stumbled unaware on the habitation of the Krimlu.

Abruptly the jungle ended, and we stepped out on a bare ledge of stone. Before us was one of the most magnificent spectacles that I have beheld. To the west of us a great black cliff rose perhaps a thousand feet—until it was almost lost against the lowering, smoky purple of the sky. Over it plunged a vast sheet of the glowing white liquid of the Silver Lake, falling in a gigantic unbroken arch to the immense pool beneath us, where it broke, with a deafening roar, into a gleaming bank of soft silver haze. Surrounding the black rock rims of the pool, the gloomy crimson of the forest closed in. The pool was a thousand feet across. The whole scene was colossal; it was awe-inspiring and impressive for the strangeness and intensity of its color.

There was no visible outlet for the silver liquid; so I knew that it must find its way off underground. I knew that we must be far below the level of the Silver Lake and the plain beyond. That fact may have accounted for the more luxuriant growth of the red vegetation.

Suddenly Naro reported the discovery of the comparatively fresh print of a hob-nailed boot in a little patch of mould on the rock. That set us to looking again for traces of Austen, and presently we found a fairly well-defined trail that led off to the east. We followed it eagerly. When we had gone perhaps a mile we came to an outcropping seam of coal. There I found the plain marks of a copper pick. Evidently a good deal of coal had been dug up and carried off down the trail.

CHAPTER X - Austen's Retreat

PERHAPS two hundred yards farther on we came to the camp. It was on a little hilltop below a giant tree. By the trunk was a little mud-daubed hut, with an open shed in front of it. By the shed was a rude clay furnace, with piles of coal, some strange ore, and large lumps of native copper lying by it. Beneath the shed was what appeared to be a small steam turbine, with a kettlelike boiler of hammered copper. Connected with it was a dynamo of crude but ingenious construction. Also there was a rude forge, and hammers, anvils, saws and drills, all of copper or bronze, and a device that I supposed had been used for drawing wire.

Simple as it seemed, that camp of Austen's was perhaps the most remarkable thing I came across in the crater. Austen was a wonderful man. Having not only an exhaustive knowledge of a half dozen fields of science—and he had not mere theories, but a practical, working knowledge—he had also courage and determination, patience and manual skill, and a great deal of resourcefulness and invention. While the average man would hardly have been able to keep alive in the jungle, Austen was able to do such things as smelt and refine ore, and set up complicated and workable electrical machinery. Of course he was fortunate in finding himself in a place where practically no effort was needed to satisfy his physical needs, and where he found various natural resources in available and easily accessible form. But I shall never cease to wonder at his accomplishments of less than a year.

I was struck by a sudden fear that we had come too late, and that something had happened to him. "Austen," I shouted, "Austen, are you here?"

For answer, an old man whom I recognized joyfully as the old scientist appeared in the rude doorway of the hut. His clothing was tattered beyond description, and he looked very worn and thin. There were lines of age and care about his wrinkled face. But his hair was neatly brushed, and he had just been shaving, for his safety razor was in his hand. A smile of

astonishment and incredulous joy sprang over his face. For a moment he was speechless. Then the old familiar voice called out uncertainly, almost sobbing with joy.

“Winfield! Melvar! Naro! Can it really be you? At last!”

Then, as if he were a little ashamed of the feeling he had shown, he pulled out his pipe and began to try to fill it, his fingers trembling with emotion. But Melvar sprang to him and threw her arms about him in a way that gave me a momentary pang of jealousy. He stuck the pipe back in his pocket, grinning awkwardly, in a way that tightened the strings of my heart.

“I forgot,” he said. “My tobacco was all gone a week ago.”

I shook his hand, and it clung to mine for a moment as if he were seeking support. Then Naro placed his palm upon Austen’s shoulder in the customary greeting of Astran.

“I’d almost given up,” the old man said. “The world is so far away that it seems almost unreal. After I had sent the wireless call a few times the devilish rustling in the sky got too close for comfort, and I decided that the hissing red lights, whatever they are, were about to locate me by the signals. So I quit that. But how did you come over?”

I told him briefly about the adventure with the red ship.

“Yes, I knew that the things were ships of some kind,” he said when I had finished. “I have been working on the quicksilver stuff, and making a few exploring trips. I have discovered several things. I had to work—to work endlessly—to keep going. Sometimes I got to feeling pretty low. Then I would shave, and try to clean up like a civilized man. And I kept repeating all the poetry I knew—that helped a lot. But Lord—you haven’t any idea how glad I am to see you. —By the way, did you bring the spectroscope and tubes?”

By way of reply, I took off the pack that contained them. He began to open it with as much enthusiasm as a small boy investigating a Christmas present. Suddenly he paused and looked at us. “But you don’t look like you’ve had any holiday yourselves. What has happened to you?”

“Two or three things,” I told him. “It hasn’t been a holiday at all. Do you happen to have any coffee left? I left mine in the tent outside the cliffs.”

“And how about a little hot Mulligan stew to go with it?” he grinned, beckoning the way inside.

The Scientist Speaks

SO we went into the cabin. Most of the room seemed to be devoted to his crude laboratory equipment. On one of his benches were several roughly modeled pottery jars, filled with the liquid from the Silver Sea. His bunk was in a screened off corner.

In a few minutes he had the coffee-pot boiling over a charcoal brazier. I believe that aroma is about the most pleasant that ever reached my nostrils. I was too much absorbed in it to do much talking, but Melvar sat down on one of Austen’s rustic stools and gave him an account of our adventures.

When the coffee was done, Austen served a meal consisting in addition of a great pot of steaming soup made of the yellow fruits cooked with the tender roots of the red plants. That stands out in my memory as one of the truly magnificent repasts that have ever been laid before me. When we had finished Melvar retired to Austen’s bunk, and Naro and I lay down on a blanket on the laboratory floor. I went to sleep at once, and, if I may credit the word of our host, slept for thirty-seven and a half hours. Although I am inclined to believe that is an exaggeration.

At any rate, when I got up, I felt a new man. Austen had set up the apparatus we brought. He had a test tube full of the silver liquid set up in a beam of X-rays, and the spectroscope in position to examine the dense purple gas that was rising from the stuff.

“How is it coming?” I asked him.

He shook his head sadly. "I don't know," he said. "I have a theory, but it doesn't seem to work out right. The key is in sight but it always eludes me. There is energy stored in the silver liquid. It may be that that amazing thing in the sky stores the energy of sunlight in the stuff. You know that the energy in sunlight amounts to something over one horsepower for each square yard on which it falls. Or perhaps the atomic energy of the gases in the air is released. It seems impossible to find the key, although I have been able to analyze the stuff pretty accurately. If I had it I could make the silver stuff go off like ten times its weight of T.N.T."

"Do you think," I asked him eagerly, "that you could set off some of it and wipe out the Krimlu?"

"Winfield," the old scientist soberly replied, "even if you could, would you wipe out a whole civilization—a science so high as that which made the Silver Lake—a culture equal to, if not above, that of our own world?"

"If you had seen those purple things—men and women that are old and hideous, and fearfully strong and malignant—you couldn't move too quickly to blot them off the earth," I cried.

"I have seen," he said seriously. "I have seen the purple monsters, and they are terrible enough. But they are not the masters. They are but the servants, or perhaps I should say the machines, of a higher power. I told you that I had been exploring a bit. I have seen some strange things.

"There is another form of intelligence here, Winfield. A form of life unrelated to humanity, without any sympathy for mankind, for any share of human feelings. Perhaps it is a danger to the human race. The things would not hesitate, I suppose, to use all humanity as they have used the people of Astran. But that does not solve the problem. Would it be right to wipe them out? Perhaps it would be better for mankind to go under. Perhaps they are superior

to us. The purposes of the creation of intelligent life might be better met by these things than by man. I have given it a great deal of thought, and I can't decide."

He fell silent and presently I said, "You say there is another form of life here. What is it like?"

"You will know soon enough. I wish I had never seen. It is not a good thing to talk about. There is no use for me to tell you."

The Chasm of the Strange Machine

THE would tell me no more. Presently I left him and went down to bathe in the stream of water that flowed back of the camp. The water was sluggish and tepid, certainly not invigorating, but it was cleansing. When I got back Melvar and Naro were up. The girl had been very glad to see Austen again. She was talking with him, very vivacious, and very beautiful. When I saw her, I loved her, if possible more than ever.

As soon as we had eaten, Austen began to dismount the spectrometer and other equipment, and to pack them. "I can go no farther with the experiments here," he said. "I am going to take the outfit to a place where we can see one of the engines of the *Krimlu*, where the silver liquid is broken up. There I may be able to get the clue I need."

In an hour we were ready to depart. Austen led the way, silent and preoccupied with the details of his work. We went down a narrow trail through the stagnating marshes, in the eldritch gloom of the weird red jungle, under the dull purple mist. For many hours we were on the way, until the purple dusk began to thicken, and a distant sighing whistle told us that night had fallen, and that the evil masters were abroad again.

Suddenly Austen called out in a guarded tone for us to halt. We all crept forward cautiously until we could see over the brink of a vast circular chasm. Sheer black walls, ringed by the red jungle, fell for a thousand feet. The round floor was a half mile across.

Upon it was the most gigantic and amazing mechanical device I have ever seen. The thing was incredibly huge, and throbbing with strange energy. It made little sound, but the space about us seemed vibrant with power.

In the center of the pit was a titanic, shining green cylinder, perhaps a hundred feet in diameter and five hundred in length. A river of gleaming silver fluid ran from an opening in the rock, through a great open aqueduct, and poured into the cylinder in the middle of the upperside. At each end of the colossal cylinder rose a metal tower. At the top of each tower was a fifty-foot globe of blue crystal, slowly turning. Between and above the spheres arched a high-flung span of white fire—a great pulsing sheet of milky opalescent light—that roared and crackled like a powerful electric discharge, and lit the chasm with an unearthly radiance.

Toward the farther side of the floor was a second enormous machine, apparently unconnected with the first, resembling a vast telescope. The white metal tube was a full two hundred feet in length, mounted on massive metal supports. It did not seem to be in action. The barrel of it was pointing at the sky, like a telescope, or a cannon.

Then I saw a row of openings low down in the side of the vast green cylinder, with shafts of bright green light pouring from them. And I saw tiny human figures working feverishly about them. They had escaped my observation at first, so far away was the floor of the pit. Now I saw that they were taking great blocks of a luminous green substance from the doors in the cylinder and carrying them to the tube that was pointing at the sky.

I saw now that the bodies of the toilers were purple. There was something in their motion that reminded me of ants. I was amazed at their strength and agility, at their ceaseless, machinelike activity. They never looked about, never paused, never rested. They were like machines, or animated corpses, driven to endless toil by some strange force. I remembered the time I had splashed the white fluid on my arm, turning it purple, and the strange excitement of my nerves. At once I linked up the raids on Astran, the bracelet that Naro had

found on the dead purple beast, and what Austen had told me of superior beings who enslaved the purple things. I knew that I looked upon the captured men and women of Astran, simply *man-machines* in this strange place!

Perhaps they were already dead. Certainly they moved, not by their own volition, but by a stronger mechanical power. They must have been under the absolute hypnotic control of the higher intelligences, Who treated their unfortunate captives, perhaps with the argent liquid, to convert them into unearthly machines, of super-human strength.

We turned away into the night that had fallen on the red jungle while we watched. I was sick with horror. Austen's face was white and his hands were trembling. There was a stern, fierce light in his eye. Now I knew, in spite of what he had said, that were the opportunity given him, he would not hesitate to wipe out the masters of the purple slaves. He said nothing, but his hands worked spasmodically, he muttered under his breath, and his dark eyes snapped with angry determination.

In a few minutes we set about preparing the apparatus for the work of the night. The spectroscope was set up, with telescopic condensers, to collect and analyze the radiation of the arch of crackling milky flame. We took care to screen ourselves in the jungle fringe, and to expose no more of the equipment to the sight of the beings below than was necessary. Austen had his drawing board set up in a convenient place behind our shelter, and he alternately peered through the telescope at the spectrum, and turned to make intricate calculation in the light of a shaded flashlight. We sat up all night at the work.

All night long the white flame played between the spinning blue crystal spheres above the vast green cylinder, filling the air with its ghostly crackle and whisper. All night long the tireless purple human machines toiled in the pit, carrying the great green blocks, and evidently stacking them in the vast cannon-like tube at the side. Whenever Austen did not need me with the analysis, I spent the time searching that amazing scene, but not once did I

catch a glimpse of anything that might have been the directing intelligence of all that marvelous activity.

Melvar had been very tired, and I had contrived a hammock for her from a great sheet of fibrous bark torn from the trunk of one of the red trees. She spent the night asleep in that, while Austen and I carried on the work, and Naro, not having scientific inclinations, contented himself with a couch composed of a few feathery branches torn from the undergrowth.

CHAPTER XI - What the Analysis Showed

JUST before daylight Austen completed his calculations, and stated the result. He was very tired, and his eyes were red. He had worked for a day and two nights since we had found him. He gave his conclusion in a colorless monotone.

“You know,” he said, “that there are several rare gases in the air, in addition to oxygen and nitrogen. The inert gas argon comprises nearly one per cent of the atmosphere, and there are, in addition, smaller quantities of helium, neon, xenon, and krypton, not to mention the carbon dioxide and water vapor. Those gases are monatomic and do not ordinarily enter into any compounds at all.

“You know that lightning in the air causes a union of nitrogen and oxygen, to form nitrous and nitric acids, which may later release their energy in the explosion of gun powder or nitroglycerine. In much the same way the force that forms the silver fluid utilizes the photochemical effect of sunlight to build up a complex molecule containing oxygen, nitrogen, and the inert gases of the helium group. It is very unstable, and may be disrupted with the release of a great amount of energy. I was able to detect the characteristic lines of most of the gases in the luminous spectrum of the purple gas, but not until I had analyzed the light of the opalescent flame, and made my deductions from that, was I able to derive the equations and

arrive at the precise structural formula, and at the exact wave length necessary to break down the molecule.”

He proceeded to launch into a detailed technical discussion of the process of analysis he had used, and of the methods of inductive reasoning by which he had arrived at his conclusion. It was rather deep for me, and I am afraid some of the salient points have already slipped my mind. But I doubt that the general reader would be interested in it anyhow.

Something more important was on my mind. “Have you found out enough ?” I asked. “Can you blow up the stuff? Can you wipe out the Krimluf?”

“I am not sure,” he said, “but I think, if I could get at that machine with a little of my equipment I could manipulate it to make it go off like a thousand tons of dynamite. The silver stuff runs into the cylinder and is converted into pure vibrant energy. If I could just speed up the process a bit!

“The Krimlu seem to live underground like ants. A month ago I found an opening into their world near the cliffs, south of the fall. There are the shafts where their ships come out, ventilator tubes, and funnels for the purple smoke from their engines. I will go down one of the shafts and see what can be done.”

“You mean we will go,” I told him. “You don’t think—”

“There is no need for you to risk your life,” he said in a voice purposely brusque to hide his emotion. “I can do as much by myself. Then there is Melvar. We must get her out of here if we can. I think a great deal of her. If we both should go—and not come back— . No, I want you to stay on top. I know I can trust you to treat her fairly. If I can blast down the earth on their underground world, we might be able to make it back around the Silver Sea, and eventually to the outside.”

“You can trust me, sir, to care for her to the best of my ability,” I told him, looking at the sandal on my right foot, and trying, without notable success, to keep my voice even and casual.

“Really,” he cried, looking at me intensely, “do you love her?”

A Declaration

I ADMITTED that I did, even using, as I remember the occasion, rather an enthusiastic, if hackneyed phrase to describe my feeling.

“I had hoped so,” Austen said. “She and you are the dearest ones to me in the world. If you were out and safe, I could—go—in peace.”

The rude hammock in which Melvar had been lying sprang into violent motion and erupted her slender, beautiful figure. She came running toward me. “I am sorry,” she gasped. “No, I mean I am glad. I was awake, Winfield. I heard you—” Her farther statements were not particularly coherent, since she was kissing me, and I was holding her in my arms and returning the gesture. I gathered on the whole that my feelings for her were well reciprocated. Some minutes later, when I came back to earth, I observed that Austen was taking the equipment down, and that Naro was standing and looking at us with an expression of extreme and comical disgust on his frank and boyish face.

By that time it was light, and soon, by the brightening of the purple haze above, we knew that the sun was rising. I saw that Austen was looking into the pit. Melvar and I walked to the edge. The great metal tube, which the purple beings had been all night in loading with the green bars, was being swung slowly about upon its mounting, until presently it was pointing at the sky above the Silver Sea.

For a moment nothing happened; then a low, deep, humming drone reached our ears, coming apparently from the complex machinery at the base of the tube. Steadily the sound

rose in pitch, until it was an intolerably high and painful scream. Suddenly, when the high rhythm of it had become unsupportable, we ceased to hear it; but I knew that it had merely passed up the scale beyond the range of our ears, and was sounding still.

Abruptly the colossal tube seemed to flash into green incandescence and a broad beam of yellow light, blindingly brilliant, and pulsing with strange energy, poured up into the dusky purple sky. Then I knew that it was this machine that made the amazing thing above the Silver Sea, from which the white liquid fell.

As we watched, bright patches of red and green shot up the beam. Slowly the bright yellow faded from the ray, but still the green luminosity clung about the tube, and still I felt that the flood of radiant, purposeful energy was flowing up into the sky. It was not long before I heard, far above us, in the distant west beyond the red-clad hill, the splash of the first great drop of silver into the argent lake. Below us the white torrent was still pouring into the vast green cylinder, the white fire was still arching between the crystal globes, and the purple slaves were still rushing about the pit with feverish and machine-like energy.

We turned away from the place and walked back into the terrible and weird semi-darkness of the scarlet jungle, still beneath the shadow of the evil intelligence that ruled the crater. I had the knowledge of Melvar's love, and the bright charm of her nearness, but I felt the unholy power of the jungle already closing about to crush us.

We reached the camp long before night, and Austen and I went to sleep. The old scientist was up again at daylight. I was amazed at his energy and vitality. He got ready the equipment he intended to take, as we were soon ready to set out for the entrance of the underworld. Austen insisted that we leave Melvar and Naro behind. There was no use, he said, to expose them to the hardships and dangers of the journey, and it seemed that no harm would be likely to come to them at the cabin. Then, without them, we could travel faster and with less danger of detection. I did not like to leave Melvar, but she was very courageous

about it, smiling through her tears. It always takes more courage in those who stay behind and wait than for those who have the lure of mystery and adventure to beckon them on.

Melvar walked with me to the edge of the clearing, and there we left her, taking a dim trail that led through the dense jungle to the south. Austen was saying nothing. He was lost in meditation. But I knew that when the time came for action, he would lose no time in thought. But how could I guess the noble thoughts that were passing in his mind? How could I realize that he was marching willingly to his doom? For my part, I was thinking of the wonderful girl I had left at the cabin. I thought, too, of the horror of the lights that haunted Astran, and of the horror that would be if the lights ever went beyond the rim—into the outer world.

After several hours Austen stopped. It is not a half mile to the shafts,” he said. “We shall have to make a rope. I have made cords from the tough bark of the red trees. That does very well. I want to reach the bottom of the pit before night. But I have reason to think that the things are active in their underworld at all hours of the day, emerging only at night because the magnetic vibration of sunlight interferes with the operation of the delicate machinery of their bodies.” Of that, I came to a better understanding later.

We began to weave a rope of strips of leatherlike bark torn from the mighty red trees. We kept at it until we had many hundred feet of the tough strands. As we worked Austen began to talk a little, in a voice that was very low, and a little husky, of his boyhood on a Western farm, and of the bright spots of his life. He told a few stories of his school and college days, and of the girl he had loved and lost. But when the rope was finished and coiled, he fell silent again, and grimly examined his automatic. He adjusted his pack, got out his pipe and filled it with my tobacco, and grinned. Then he said soberly, “We are here. We are ready to play our hand, to win or to lose. And if we lose—”

He thrust out his hand. I shook it and we walked on silently. We had now gone more than a hundred yards when the scarlet forest thinned, and we walked out on a level stretch of

bare white sand. The clear space was perhaps a mile long and half as wide. Along the western side rose a dark precipitous cliff, like that over which the silver fall plunged, with a line of red brush along the top. At the foot was a great sloping bank of talus, scattered with gigantic boulders. The cliff and the lofty crimson forest that rimmed the open space on the other three sides, seemed to reach into the dusky purple of obscurity of the low-hanging sky.

Spaced irregularly about the center of the flat were perhaps a dozen low circular metal structures—evidently the mouths of great white metal tubes projecting from the earth. From five of them dense clouds of purple vapor were pouring.

The Sacrifice

WE left the shelter of the jungle and quickly approached the nearest of the wells. The metal curbing was about four feet high, around a circular pit some 20 feet in diameter. We leaned over and looked into it. The tube was lit faintly for a few feet down the walls, but we saw no light toward the bottom of the tube. A faint humming sound came up out of the darkness, and I felt a strong current of air flowing down the tube. It was altogether stranger and more terrible than I had anticipated. I doubt that I could have found the courage to descend.

“Is the rope long enough ?” I whispered.

“Yes,” he replied in a cautious undertone. “On the day I discovered the place I dropped a pebble in the well and timed its fall with my watch. The depth is just over five hundred feet.”

I put the end of the cord over the metal rim and paid it out until only enough was left to hitch around my body. With a smile of forced cheerfulness, Austen looked to his pack, knocked out the pipe, and put it in his pocket.

“Winfield, my boy, I hope to see you soon again,” he said. “It may take only an hour or two to lay my mine and return to the shaft. But of course I know nothing of what I am to encounter. You wait and hold the rope, and if I need to send you any message I will jerk it three times, and you can pull it up. The note will tell when to put it down again for me to climb out. Good-by, my boy. You—”

He started to say something more, but his voice broke, and he turned abruptly to the well. I braced myself against the curbing, and he climbed over and started down. I looked over and watched him. In a few moments his head and shoulders had shrunk to a little blot against the darkness of the well. Soon he was out of my sight, although for a long time I felt the tugging of the rope. Suddenly the tension relaxed. He had reached the bottom, or—fearful thought! —he had lost his grip on the rope and was hurtling downward through the darkness. I listened in an agony of suspense. It was several minutes before I was reassured to feel three twitches of the cord. I pulled it up. On the end was tied a piece of paper, with these words penciled upon it:

“Dear Winfield, I hate to leave us thus, without telling you, as I intend to do. But I could not tell you. Go back, get Melvar, and travel as far as you can from this accursed place. May you and she survive and lead a happy life together, in here if you cannot reach the world beyond.

“I will give you twenty hours. In that time you can go far north of the silver fall. I am sure, with the equipment I have with me, I can explode one of the engines and send all this part of the valley skyward—if I live to carry out my plan. Good-by,

Austen.”

Then I saw that he had been planning all along to give up his life. The note had been written some time before he left. I cursed the stupidity that had kept me from perceiving his

intention. If I had but thought, I would have known it was impossible for the aged scientist to climb the rope from the bottom of the pit. Dear old Austen! The truest friend I ever had! His wrinkled, smiling face, his kind blue eyes, his low familiar voice, are gone forever!

CHAPTER XII - The Forest Aflame

I HAVE a very confused recollection of what happened immediately afterward. My own actions seem a vague, disordered dream. My bitter grief at Austen's self-sacrifice was the only thing real to me. I believe I began carrying rocks from the boulder-strewn slope at the foot of the cliff, with the idea of securing the rope to them so I could go down in search for him. But my memory of that is very faint.

The first thing I remember clearly is that I was staggering back to the shaft with a heavy rock in my arms, when I caught a whiff of acrid smoke and awoke to the realization that the purple sky was darkened with drifting clouds, and the air was already heavy with the suffocating pungent odor of the burning red vegetation. My instinctive alarm at the thought of fire served to bring me to myself, and I was suddenly fearful for the safety of Melvar.

I knew that, had the red-hot rocket-ship in which we had crossed the Silver Sea chanced to fall in the jungle instead of on the barren hilltop, a conflagration would have spread from it at once. Abruptly I remembered that the glowing fragments of the one we had wrecked had fallen in the northern forest. Austen's cabin lay in that direction! I knew that the red vegetation was peculiarly inflammable, and that the fire fed on the oxygen of the heavy atmosphere, would advance with terrible speed.

For a moment, in a panic of indecision, I listened. From the north I heard the crackling roar of a mighty conflagration. Then my mind was made up. Any attempt to find Austen and induce him to give up his plan of self-sacrifice would be terribly uncertain. Melvar was in immediate danger, and I knew that Austen valued her life above his own. But

even then, I knew in my heart that it was too late, though I would not let myself believe it. Fire is a pitiless and remorseless enemy.

At a dead run I started up the trail by which we had entered the clearing. Ever the smoke became thicker and more acrid, while the crackling roar of the fire rang ever louder in my ears. I ran on through the ghastly gloom of the scarlet jungle, in made desperation, even after hope was gone, until the hot suffocating breath of the flames was choking me, until the bright lurid curtain of the fire was spread before my eyes, and the intense heat radiation blistered my skin. The vast wall of flame swept forward like a voracious demoniac thing of crimson, implacable, irresistible, overwhelming. It plunged forward like a rushing tidal wave of red. *Already the fire had passed the site of the cabin!*

I was suddenly hopeless, and despairing, and very tired. The flames rushed forward faster, by far, than a human being could force a way through the jungle. With the knowledge that I had just lost the only two beings that in all the world of men ever mattered to me, it hardly seemed worth while to try to save my own life. For a moment I stood there, about to cast myself into the flames. But it is not the nature of an animal to die willingly, no matter how slight the promise of life may be.

When I could endure the heat no longer, when the pain of my blistered skin, and the outcries of my tortured lungs had grown unsupportable, I turned and ran toward the clearing again. Behind me, the flames roared like a lightning express. The fern-like fronds burned explosively, like gun-cotton. My nostrils and lungs were seared and smarting. The hot wind dried my skin and left it scorched and cracked. I was blinded by the smoke. I longed to throw myself down and seek the temporary ecstasy of a breath of clear air from near the ground, of a cooling plunge into a muddy pool. The red jungle reeled about me, but I fought my way on, like a man in a dream.

At last I staggered into the open space. The last of the giant trees exploded into flames not a score of yards behind me. Sparks rained upon me. My clothing caught fire. I ran on, fighting at it with my hands. The jungle back of me roared deafeningly, an angry, surging sea of lurid red flames, awful, overwhelming, fantastically terrible. Heat radiation poured across the clearing in a pitiless beam. I struggled on across the white sand, away from flames that tossed themselves up like volcano-ridden ranges of scarlet alps, until I reached the shelter of a great boulder on the slope below the cliff.

I flung myself down behind the rock, gulping down the cool air and rubbing out the fire in my clothing with my blackened hands. For many hours I lay there, tortured by thirst and pain. At last I fell into a light sleep of troubled dreams, in which huge, winged, green ants flew after me through burning crimson forests and in which I saw the dear form of Melvar devoured again and again by the flames.

I was awakened, after a time, I know not how long, by a cool wind that had sprung up from the north. For a moment my mind was lost in blank wonder, and then came the desolate memory that Melvar and Austen were lost. In hopeless misery I got weakly to my feet and walked unsteadily around the boulder until I could look across the clearing.

As I leaned against the rock, gazing eastward, it was a strangely altered and desolate scene that lay before my eyes. The red forest was gone. Below me was a region of low rolling hills, black and grim beneath the lowering, smoky purple sky. The white sand about me stood out in sharp contrast to the charred and gloomy waste beyond, from which a few slender wisps of dark smoke were still rising. All life was gone. It was a dead world. But still the dense purple clouds poured out of the shafts of the underworld, adding their weight to the dismal sky.

A great homesickness for the world, and my fellow men came over me. Then I heard a strange humming behind me, and a slight metallic clatter. I turned around in apathetic curiosity.

A Strange Duel

AND I came face to face with a monster so utterly strange and weirdly terrible that the very shock of it almost unseated my wandering reason. But so completely had my interests and hopes in life been severed, so near was I to the great divide of death, that I was past emotion of any kind. At first I looked on the thing with a curious lack of interest, as the soul of one newly dead might look with numbed faculties on his new habitation. But as I looked upon it, an icy current of fear stole over me like the creeping cold of the north, and clasped me to its frozen breast. I had met so many horrors that I had begun to think myself immune to terror. But I had met no such thing as that.

I knew that it was an intelligent, a sentient being. But it was not human, not a thing of flesh and blood at all. It was a machine! Or, rather, it was in a machine, for I felt far more of it than I saw a will, a cold and alien intellect, a being, malefic, inhuman, inscrutable. It was a thing that belonged, not in the present earth, but in the tomb of the unthinkable past, or beyond the wastes of interstellar space, amid the inconceivably horrors of unknown spheres.

There was a bright, gleaming globe, three feet in diameter, lit with vivid flowing fires of violet and green. A strange swirling mist of brilliant points of many colored lights danced madly about it—a coruscating fog of iridescent fire—moving, flickering, in an incredible rhythm.

That unearthly thing rested upon a frame of metal. It was the head of a metallic monster. It was set on an oblong box of white metal, to which were attached six long-jointed metal limbs. The being stood nine feet high, at least. It was standing on three of the limbs and

holding my rifle, which I had left where I had been lying, turning it and feeling of it with a cluster of slender, fingerlike tentacles on the end of the metal arm. It was working the mechanism of the gun, and apparently looking at it, though it had no eyes that I could see.

Suddenly the gun went off, throwing up the sand between me and the monster. With a grotesquely half-human attitude of alarmed surprise, the being dropped the gun and sprang back like a gigantic spider. The motion freed me from my paralysis of horror, and I started backing cautiously around the boulder, afraid to run. As I moved it sprang forward and a slender tube of white metal, in one of the tentacled hands, was suddenly pointed toward me. As the monster moved, there was a humming sound from it, and little jets of purple gas hissed from holes in the sides of the box-like body.

I drew my automatic and fired at the metal tube.

I must have made an unusually fortunate shot, for the object was carried out of the metal grasp, and fell spinning on the sand. On the instant, I turned and ran toward another great boulder, as large as a railroad locomotive, that lay fifty yards to the north. As I ran I heard the clatter and whirring of the mechanical being. I paused at the edge of the ' rock and took a last glimpse back.

The monster was holding the little tube in one of its limbs, and apparently adjusting it with another. Then it suddenly extended the thing toward me. I dived behind the rock. And a bright ray of orange light shot past the boulder—a beam like that which had come from the being in the door of the rocket ship. Then I knew that here was an entity of the same kind as the one I had destroyed that night—one of the ruling intelligences of the crater, the Krimlu.

For several minutes I crouched behind the boulder, expecting the terrible being to come striding around after me at any instant; but it did not come, so presently I began to think. Perhaps the things were not so powerful, or so extremely intelligent after all. I had killed one, even if it was just by a chance shot in the dark. This one had seemed surprised and

alarmed when the rifle went off, and I supposed that a being so intelligent as I had at first thought it to be might have inferred the nature and use of the weapon from its appearance. And I thought that it must be afraid of me, after my pistol bullet had knocked its own weapon out of its grip, or it would have followed me around the boulder. Then I began to wonder what it was going to do.

It evidently intended to strike me with the ray weapon. And not only did it respect me, but it knew that I stood in deathly fear of it. It knew that I was trying to escape, so it might reasonably expect me to leave the unscalable cliff and attempt a break against the open country. And if I were to do that, I would naturally keep in the shelter of my own boulder as long as possible. If the monster thought in that way, the logical thing for it to do would be to creep out of the upper side of its rock, where I would inevitably come into its sight by whatever direction I left my breastwork.

Of course there was a frightful risk in taking any action on such a hypothesis—a greater risk than I realized at the time. If the monster were less intelligent than I supposed, I might blunder on it; if it were more intelligent, it might have anticipated my plan—might be waiting to trap me.

But I crawled out along the upper side of my boulder and peered over a smaller rock which would serve me as a breastwork, my automatic ready. I expected to see the creature in my range, and itself intent upon my other lines of retreat. But it was not there. For a moment I thought I was doomed, but the orange ray did not strike, and I was forced to the conclusion that the monster was not in a position for action at all.

For a moment I was tempted to precipitate flight across the clearing, but I knew that such a move would put me at the mercy of the ray, and I thought that it might not yet be too late to carry out my original plan. I lay flat, with the gun trained on the spot where I expected it to appear. For perhaps fifteen minutes nothing happened; then it proved that my hypothesis

was justified. The weird being suddenly sprang into view, with the strange weapon grasped in its glittering arm. It seemed to be looking beyond my boulder. I was lying ready, with the automatic leveled. It was a matter of the merest instant to aim at the green sphere and pull the trigger.

The globe was shattered as if it had been made of glass. The glittering fragments showered off the metal box, while the whole mechanical body suddenly became very rigid, and fell heavily to the side. A puff of coruscating green mist floated out of the globe as it broke, and swiftly dissipated, and the sparkling lights were about the thing no more. The monster was evidently dead.

For a few moments I hesitated, but I was sure the thing had been killed, and my curiosity got the better of my fear. I cautiously approached it. For a moment I marveled at the wonderful workmanship of the machine and at the cleverness of its design; then I saw something that made me forget all else. Something beside the crystal shell had fallen.

The tissue of it was very delicate, and it had been broken by the fall, so that the body juices were running from it. The brain cavity of it was very large—perhaps larger than that of a man—covered only with a thin chitinous shell. The limbs were but thin tentacles, almost altogether atrophied. In fact, the brain seemed three-fourths of the total bulk. The body was so badly smashed that I could tell little about it, but the tiny limbs were covered with chitin, and there were the rudimentary stumps of fine, tissue-like wings. There were no visible traces of digestive organs, or of mandibles.

The thing was plainly an insect. From just what species it had sprung in the long process of evolution in the crater it would be difficult to say. For several reasons, I believe it was an ant. At any rate, it had reached about the ultimate stage of evolution. Machines had altogether replaced bodies of flesh and blood. I believe the thing had been nourished by the

sparkling green vapor, which must have circulated like blood through the protecting crystal sphere.

It seems incredible to find great intelligence in any form of life other than human; but science thinks that life and intelligence must rise and fall in recurring cycles, and that the earth has probably been ruled by many different forms of life, each of which has been blotted out by some cataclysm. The Krimlu were a surviving remnant of archaic ages.

CHAPTER XII - When Austen Struck

I LOST little time in the examination of the dead creature. The shafts from which it had come were but a few hundred yards below, and the purple gas was still rolling out of the funnels. I did not know when a second monster might follow the first. My mind was too much upset by grief and terror to be capable of intelligent planning, but I knew I wanted to get away from here, and I think I had some notion of reaching the northern pass, and of getting back to an unburned growth of the red vegetation, for I was weak with thirst and hunger. But all that was very vague.

I walked around the wells, keeping at a distance ; and struck out for the east as fast as my wearied limbs could carry me. Soon the cliff was out of sight. All about was the desolate, rolling black landscape, with the gloomy purple sky overhead. My thoughts were as dark and sere as the world. Memories of dear old Austen and of lovely Melvar were always with me, even when I tried to banish them and to think rationally of my position.

When I had gone perhaps three hours from the cliff, and had almost lost my fear of pursuit, I saw a great cigar-shaped object of gleaming white on a low hill before me. So dulled were my perceptions that it was many minutes before I realized that it was the rocket-ship in which we had come over the Silver Sea. Then, bringing a faint thrill of hope,

the thought came to me that it was still probably in a condition to fly, and that, if I could succeed in controlling it, it offered a possible avenue of escape from the crater.

I walked up to the thick metal walls. They seemed undamaged by the fire. Of course, they were used to withstanding the far higher temperatures developed during flight. I walked around the ship, and was surprised to see that the heavy metal door, which we had left open, had been swung shut. Lying against it was the charred skeleton of a man. About the bones were woven metal garments and crystal armor that I recognized with a shock as Naro's. So, I thought, the fellow had deserted his beautiful sister to seek the shelter of the rocketship, and had fallen a victim to the flames at the last moment.

For a moment, I stared grimly at the remains; then, animated by a sudden ray of hope, I sprang to the door, pulled it open, and leaped into the ship. There, lying on the floor, was the lovely form of Melvar. Her clothing was tattered and smeared with stains of red and black from the burning forest, but she was unharmed. It was almost incredible to me to find her restored. I was half afraid that my mind had failed at last, and that she was but an illusion. I dropped on my knees beside her, and kissed her warm red lips. She stirred a little and, still but half awake, put a trustful arm about my shoulder.

"Winfield, I knew you would come," she whispered at last. "But where are Naro and Austen?"

"They will never come," I said.

She drew me fiercely toward her, as if to use me for a shield against the awful truth. It was some time before she was able to talk; but presently she told me how Naro had seen the smoke, and how she had thought of seeking shelter from the fire in the rocket ship. They had run down the trail we had made as they left the ship. The fire had overtaken them just as they reached it. The boy had carried her the last few yards, had put her through the door, and then

had been unable to enter himself. But, a hero to the last, a worthy warrior of old Astran, he had swung the door shut with his dying motion.

Presently I turned my attention to the ship. The marvelous periscope still gave the illusion that the bow was transparent. When I moved the little control lever, the jets of purple gas rushed out again. After a time I had the vessel worked loose from its place in the earth. Then, once again, I pulled up the little metal knob and pushed it forward.

The blackened terrain was colored by the purple mist. It was dimmed, blurred, blotted out. We shot through the purple cloud and abruptly plunged into clear air and blessed sunshine. Melvar stood by me, with her arm upon my shoulder. She cried out gladly as we came into the light. It was not quite noon and the sun was shining very brightly into the crater. The crescent Silver Lake was still gleaming with the same argent luster, and Astran shone like a great gem set in the dark red upland beyond.

Suddenly the clouds of purple mist below were thrown up and scattered in a thousand ragged streamers. A great blaze of opalescence burst out where it had been. A flood of fire ran over the Silver Sea. It was a white, milky light like that we had seen between the blue crystal globes of the great machine in the chasm. In a moment the whole crater was a torn and angry ocean of iridescent flame. The red upland was blotted out, and Astran vanished forever. White flames that were like the tongues of burning hydrogen that burst from exploding suns, flared up behind us.

Then we heard the sound of the cataclysm—a crashing roar like the thunder of a thousand falling mountains, as deep, as vast, as awful, as the crash of colliding worlds. At the same instant we felt the force of the greatest explosion that has ever occurred on earth. The rocket shot upward as though shot out of a mighty cannon. The blue sky darkened about us, and the stars flamed out like a million scintillating gems, in incredible myriads, gleaming

cold and hard against the infinite empty blackness. We had been hurled out of the atmosphere and into interplanetary space!

Austen had struck! The world of the Krimlu was no more! The whole Silver Sea had gone off in a great explosion. From our ever-rising craft we could see the desert spread out around the mountain like a vast yellow sea, rimmed on the south by a steely blue line that was the ocean. The white fire dulled, faded, and was gone as quickly as it had flashed up. The crater of the Mountain of the Moon was left a wild black ruin of jagged, scattered masses of smoking stone. Of the Silver Lake, of the red vegetation upon the upland, of brilliant Astran, not a trace was left!

The crater was left far behind in the long arching flight of the rocket. The white frozen brilliance of the stars faded out, the untold glories of the solar corona were dimmed, and blue was restored to the midnight sky. We were plunging toward the desert in the direction of Kanowna. I pulled back the lever and used the full force of the rockets to check our meteor-like flight until the fuel was exhausted. A moment afterward we struck the earth.

We climbed out and left the vessel there on the sand. Just as the stars were coming out that night we arrived at the headquarters of a great sheep ranch. People were very much excited over the earthquake. (The shock of the explosion of the Silver Lake had been registered at every seismographic station in the world.)

The rancher and his wife cared for us with great hospitality, if ill-controlled curiosity. After we had had a week of rest, they took us by automobile to Kanowna. There I astounded them by rewarding their generosity with a magnificent emerald—I still had in my pack a half pound or so of jewels that Naro had brought me from Astran.

Melvar ever surprised me with her innocent beauty, her grace and poise, with the ease with which she learned to face new situations, and to meet people. I believe that no one ever

suspected that she had not had a lifetime of training in the best of society. We were married at Kanowna, and reached Perth a few days later.